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ABSTRACT

A variety of activities are presented that are designed to stimulate conversation and communication among students in classes in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). The first part of the report discusses the nature of communicative activity and of classroom conversation. The role of the teacher is seen as making the activity as truly communicative as possible, structuring activities so students use the information exchanged and are held accountable for their English usage, guiding without dominating, creating an atmosphere supporting self-expression, making students aware of the characteristics of authentic conversational English, and refraining from grammar correction during a communicative activity. The second part describes nine activity types that suggest communication but are not truly communicative: listening cloze; identification of appropriate conversational utterances from a list; dyadic information exchange; use of pictures or realia; elicitation of expected responses; oral reports that lead to classroom conversation; activities to develop conversational strategies; improvisation; and completion of plans, maps, or diagrams. In the third section, activities that resemble authentic communication are defined and described, including: free questions and answers; role-playing and socio-drama; class discussion; and other group activities such as problem-solving and task-oriented exercises. (MSE)

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Getting Them to Talk: Communicative Activities for the ESOL Classroom

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Introduction

One of the thorniest problems ESOL teachers face is getting students to interact orally in authentic ways. The first part of this paper will attempt to answer several questions which I feel have great relevance to the topic at hand. These are: What do we know about "real communicative activity"? What do we know about conversational language? and What are the implications of the information for the communicative classroom? In the second part of the paper, I will briefly describe a variety of activities, many of which are not truly communicative in nature. And in the third part, after discussing the progression from controlled to free activity, I will describe several other activities and explain how each can be made progressively more communicative.

Part One

The first question is, **What do we know about "real communicative activity"?** "To communicate" means not merely to speak, but to say something. It is not a formal activity that can be practiced in drills, but rather is a willful action which grows out of the immediate needs of the participants. Communication requires the participation of at least a sender and a receiver. Ideas, information, or feelings must be conveyed. In "real communication," a speaker wants to convey information for some reason and a listener wants to receive information. Listeners normally search what they hear for certain pieces of information which they need. Finally, expression is made to serve meaning, and the participants' attention is focused on the message, not on achieving correctness of expression.

The second question is, **What do we know about conversational language?** Conversation is a means of communication. Conversational language is characterized not by perfectly complete sentences but by many incomplete sentences, elliptical constructions lacking subjects or predicates. Questions are more likely to be answered with a rejoinder that provides additional information than by a short answer such as "No, I can't" and nothing else. Questions are not necessarily followed by answers; the response is often another question.

While much of conversational language is formulaic and filled with clichés, conversation can be as diverse and subtle as its participants. It can contain numerous social and contextual factors as well as pragmatic presuppositions. The language of conversation is also determined by matters of social style or level. What people say in a conversation, how they say it, when they say it, and what nonverbal behaviors they use to reinforce or substitute for their verbal utterances are all governed by cultural constraints that determine such matters as how to disagree, how to take turns, how close to stand or sit, when to make or avoid eye contact, how to interrupt, how much volume to use, which gestures or vocalizations to use and which to avoid, when to remain silent, or how to terminate the conversation.

In order to develop and sustain everyday conversation, native English speakers employ the following conversational strategies: First, when you are asked a question, answer it and then ask another question yourself which is related to something in your answer. For example:

A: Where are going to go on your vacation?

B: London. Do you know what the climate's like there this time of year?

Second, when you are asked a question, give some extra information and then ask an appropriate question. For example:

A: Where are you from?

B: Virginia. My home is near the Appalachian Mountains. Have you ever visited that part of the country?

Third, if there is any part of a question or reply that you do not understand, be brave enough to say so at once. It is better than pretending that you do understand. Unless you understand most of the questions and replies, the conversation will die. And fourth, if you are asked a question and you do understand it but do not want to reply because you think it is too personal, you must think of a way of giving a vague answer and then changing the topic.

The third question is, **What are the implications of the above for the classroom?** There are many. First, the teacher must make the activity as truly communicative as possible. This means that all of the students are actively producing or receiving information. They can be doing

so alternating turns, as in a conversation, or in certain communicative activities involving listening, reading and/or writing which I will describe later. The speaker or speakers must want to convey information for some reason, and the listener or listeners must want to receive some part of this information for some reason. In addition, the listener cannot already possess the information which he or she is to receive during the communication.

Second, the teacher can structure activities so that two tasks are involved: one or more students must somehow utilize the information received. This type of activity accomplishes two things: students have a reason for communicating (and it is therefore more likely that the communication will be done as it should be done) and students are held accountable for the way they use English; that is, the information they provide cannot be utilized unless it is comprehensible and complete.

Third, the teacher should not dominate the activity; the teacher's role is to plan, structure, and guide communicative activity. After setting things up, the teacher should step back and speak very little, remaining available as consultant or facilitator.

Fourth, the teacher should create a classroom environment or atmosphere in which students feel free to express themselves, to make mistakes, and to try out new language. Such an atmosphere can be accomplished by putting the students at ease, by encouraging them to take a personal interest in one another and to bring their own real-life experiences into class for discussion, and by encouraging them to take risks in English.

Fifth, teachers should make students aware of the characteristics of authentic conversational English and also of the conventions and strategies of conversational exchange, including both verbal and nonverbal behavior. If the communicative activity is conversational, the goal is the use of English as it is used by native English speakers in natural conversation. Students need to know, for example, how to interrupt, how to take turns, how far away to stand, when to make eye contact, what body language to use, and so on. Unfortunately, this kind of information is rarely provided in textbooks.

Sixth, and this is my personal view, the teacher should not correct grammar during a communicative activity. Communication deals with the conveying of information. Interrupting a student to correct or call attention to error disturbs the flow and may inhibit the speaker. Moreover, assessment should focus on whether information has been successfully conveyed or not. In activities involving two tasks--one student providing information and the other using that information in some way--assessment of the activity should be carried out by the student who needs to use the information given; if this is inadequate, he or she can complain and demand revision by the student who failed to communicate effectively.

I am not suggesting that teacher correction for accuracy is eliminated. It may well happen that a student succeeds in getting a message across in a grammatically or pragmatically imperfect way. I am suggesting, however, that teacher correction should be given at some other stage and not during the communicative activity. It is important that students communicate *for each other*, knowing that the language they produce will not be assessed in the first instance by the teacher but rather by their partner for its adequacy in the completion of a task.

Part Two

In this section I will briefly review a variety of activities which are in some way communication-like but which are not truly communicative in the sense defined in Part One.

1- Listening Cloze - Students listen to authentic natural monologue or dialogue which contains such characteristics as reduced forms, hesitation, interruption, unfinished sentences, and false starts. They must fill in the blanks on a script of the text. Song lyrics may also be used. The words deleted may focus on particular grammatical forms such as pronouns or verbs, connecting words or semantically related words such as place names.

2- Find the Conversation - Students are given a printed dialogue which contains extraneous utterances. The task is to find the conversation by identifying the appropriate utterances.

3- Dyads - Dyads are exercises for pairs of students in which one partner, sometime both partners, has information unknown to the other. To complete a task correctly, partners must

exchange accurate information intelligibly. For instance, pairs of students sit back to back. One student draws, for example, an arrangement of geometric shapes and lines of different types or simple stick figures, houses, trees, hills, mountains; while doing this, he or she tells his partner exactly what is being drawn and where. The partner tries to duplicate the drawing. Comparing their drawing at the end reveals how well they communicated.

4- Pictures or Visual Realia - A picture, a series of pictures, or a cultural artifact of any type--e.g., a map or menu--is used as the basis of a dialogue, description, or narrative. A cartoon or comic strip can be explained or retold orally.

5- Expected Responses - When native English speakers use certain conversational phrases, they wait for their interlocutor to make the expected response. If something very different is said, or no response is given, the speaker may be surprised or even offended. When two people meet for the first time, for example, and one says, "Glad to meet you," the response is often a repetition with stress on the final word: "Glad to meet *you*." Students may not know how and when to use such expected responses. One activity which encourages their use is one in which students are required to fill in the expected responses on worksheets. On the worksheet appears, first, a short description of a situation. An example follows.

SITUATION	EXPECTED RESPONSE
someone sneezes	_____

A similar activity would focus on rejoinders:

SITUATION	RESPONSE	REJOINDER
a friend receives your gift	Oh, thank you. It's lovely.	_____
a friend is unable to help you	I'm sorry.	_____
two people bump into each other	Pardon me.	_____

(The expected rejoinders could be "I'm glad you like it," "That's OK, thanks anyway", and "Pardon *me*.")

6- Oral Reports that Lead to Classroom Conversation - Students select and report on news articles; classmates jot down notes to be used in questions later. The class asks the reporting

student to restate elements of the news story they did not understand completely and to clarify details. Students also ask each other questions about the story, and the reporting student reacts to their answers, pointing out errors or adding details. If the students' questions are all of the *who, what, when, where* variety, the teacher may want to ask a few questions that require making an inference, giving an opinion, or relating a person experience. About a murder, the teacher might ask, "Is murder always wrong?" Gradually, students should learn to ask such questions themselves, gradually limiting the teacher's participation while at the same time increasing the amount of meaningful conversation among themselves.

7- Activities to Develop Conversational Strategies - Students are given incomplete conversations to complete by using the strategies that native speakers use in conversational exchanges. For example, they are to answer a question by responding and then asking another question related to something in the response. Or, they answer a question by giving some extra information and then asking an appropriate question. Students are also trained in the strategies of asking for clarification when they do not understand a question or reply and evading the question and changing the topic when they feel the question is too personal and they prefer not to reply to it.

8- Improvisations - Slips of paper with hypothetical situations are distributed to the students, either individuals or groups. They must improvise a conversation. Some examples of situations are: (1) Your are one of the first tourists to the moon and you are sending a message back to someone on earth. (2) You have $1500 to spend on a vacation and go to a travel agency to plan it. Students can write up situations themselves; after the teacher corrects the language, slips of paper containing the situations can be drawn.

9- Completing Plans, Diagrams or Maps - Pairs of students are given maps, plans or diagrams which are of the same thing, say the stores and other buildings in a town, but are incomplete in different ways--e.g., the hardware store appears on one may but not the other, where it is represented by a question mark. Each map lists the buildings which are not labeled on that map, and the students' task is to find out what the unlabeled buildings on their respective maps.

From Controlled to Free Communication

The effective teaching of communication skills requires the appropriate structuring of communicative activities. Just as there is a danger that these activities may be so controlled that they bear little resemblance to real communication, there is also the possibility they may be so unstructured that they merely provide occasions for students to exchange ungrammatical utterances of their own choice. To avoid either of these two extremes, teachers must gauge the communicative activities to the proficiency level of the learners.

Just as there is a continuum from guided writing to free written expression, so is there a continuum from guided communication to free communication. Communication activities may be categorized as controlled, semicontrolled and free. The degree of control refers to the amount of structure that the teacher imposes on an activity and to the number of choices that students are expected to make.

Part Three

Here, we will look at several activities which are very much like authentic communication in the world outside the classroom. Communicative activities can involved listening and speaking alone, or reading and/or writing can play a part. For example, one student is asked to read a text of his or her own choice and relate the contents to the class. The class, meanwhile, has been assigned a writing task which requires certain information from that text. This task can be completed successfully only if the student who read the text communicates the needed information and if that information is understood by the class.

Workshopping essays in small groups is another possibility. One student tells about a composition he or she has written--e.g., the topic, the process, problems. Then the group reads that piece, points out places where the meaning is not clear, tells what they like most and least about it, and make suggestions for improving it.

Activities which are truly communicative in nature meet all of most of the five criteria which define authentic communicative activity:

-the information transfer principle, whereby some information must be transferred from a sender to a receiver

-the information gap principle, which requires that the receiver not already possess the information he or she receives

-the jigsaw principle, whereby students begin with different pieces of information and finish with the same information

-the task dependency principle, which requires that we create wherever possible a Task 2 which can be done only if a Task 1 has been successfully completed, and

-the correct for content principle, which argues that during the communication, the students' language production should be judged on its communicative efficacy in relation to a specific task.

The following activities are truly communicative at the level of free communication. However, some students may require practice at the levels of controlled and semicontrolled communication before they are ready to perform the activity at the level of free communication. For this reason, I will explain how the teacher can, step by step, increase his or her control over the activity and decrease the communicative participation that students make.

1- Question and Answer Activities

-free question and answer activity - Students make up their own questions and answers. These might be related to a topic discussed in class, to an illustration in or out of the textbook, to a text or dialogue that the students have heard or read, to a composition written by a student, and so on.

The **interview** is a free question and answer activity. There are basically two ways of conducting interviews. In the first, students question a classmate who stands up about anything at all, the only restriction being that they cannot ask any question they would not want to answer themselves. The student being interviewed must give an appropriate answer to each question, although it my be false. Alternative, a visitor to class may be interviewed. A second way to conduct an interview is to have pairs of students interview each other about a particular topic.

-semicontrolled question and answer activity - The teacher gives students a chance to arrive at their own responses to questions. The teacher can ask the questions, or students can work in pairs and take turns asking and answering questions provided by the teacher or textbook.

-controlled question and answer activity - Students have a script to follow and few decisions to make, but they must insert facts or ideas or opinions that are their own and that make each communicative exchange unique.

2- Role-play

Role-plays a type of skit in which learners assume the identity of individual characters in a given situation and engage in a conversation that reflects the personalities, needs and desires of the characters portrayed. In setting up a role-play, the teacher should explain the situation, perhaps go over some of the utterances that would grow out of the situation, and perhaps demonstrate role-playing with a student or another teacher. The other steps depend on what type or level of role-play is chosen.

-free role-play - No prescribed structures and very few suggestions, if any, for the vocabulary to be used are presented. The teacher simply gives students a situation and the characters; alternatively, students come up with their own situations. After an appropriate preparation time, students deliver their presentations.

-semicontrolled role-play - Here, structures and/or vocabulary may be suggested by the teacher, but much of the content is determined by the participants. A list of utterances or perhaps only a list of words which could be used in the situation (e.g., shopping in a market) are given to students who are allowed time to prepare the role-play before presenting it to the class.

-controlled role-play - This involves the use of grammatical structures and vocabulary which are controlled by a script. The script offers the participants the choice of two or more possible utterances; each successive choice depends on the previous one. A more complex version is one containing imperatives. This version requires the participants to change indirect to direct speech.

Socio-drama is a type of role-play that involves a series of student enactment of solutions to a social problem. The problem takes the form of an open-ended story containing one clear, easily

identifiable conflict which is of relevance to the students. The class discusses the problem, after which the teacher selects participants to enact the drama and assigns roles. After the role-play, the class explores alternative ways of solving the problem. New role-players are chosen, who then present a reenactment. Here are two possible dilemmas for socio-drama: (1) a student comes to class Monday unprepared to take a test because he or she though the test was on Tuesday; (2) the young husband who receives a sweater, two sizes too large, knitted by his mother-in-law.

3- Class Discussions

Teachers can stimulate a successful class discussion of a topic in the following way: (1) Introduce a topic and an outline. Giving a few leading questions in the preceding class period so that students have a chance to think about them will result in a more fruitful discussion. (2) Nominate the first student to introduce the problem or issue. (3) Guide the group in keeping the discussion going. (4) Insure that all students participate. (5) Take a seat with the students and relinquish the leadership of the activity.

-free discussion - A free discussion is an open exchange of ideas on a topic suggested by the students or based on a lecture or reading assignment.

-semicontrolled discussion - The teacher provides the topic and an outline or list of points to be discussed, while the students produce their own language. Or, a list of questions which require analysis, evaluation or judgment may be provided. A third approach is to make use of **values clarification**, a process of evaluating one's own personal beliefs, feelings, goals, and values. One type of values clarification activity is the personal opinion survey. Here, the student is forced to examine his or her personal values concerning a certain issue before discussion of it and thus be prepared to enter into the discussion and compare his or her opinions with those of others.

-controlled discussion - The teacher provides the topic, some of the language, and an outline or list of points to be discussed.

4- Other Group Activities

Problem-solving and task-oriented activities - Because their attention is focused on solving a problem or completing a task, student engage in authentic, meaningful communication with each other.

A problem may be solved by students working in groups or by each student working alone. In the latter case, after each student has his solution, the students may be grouped into several small groups. The task of each group is to arrive at a consensus regarding the solution to the problem, select a spokesperson, and formulate a rationale for the group's decision. A further possible step is to have all of the groups arrive at a consensus. Here is a topic for a problem-solving activity: Imagine that your school has just received a gift of $500,000.00. Decide what to spend it on.

-free group activities - One activity of this type is to provide groups with travel brochures, maps, and transportation schedules; each group must then plan a vacation in a different place. When this is done, they report to their classmates, who ask for clarifications or additional details.

-semicontrolled group activities - If the teacher provides a list of programs, activities, labs, materials, and so on, the $500,000.00 gift activity becomes semicontrolled.

-controlled group activities - Small groups can be given strips of paper which contain directions for making or doing something, or a short dialogue or narrative, with only one sentence of the text per slip of paper. The task is to get the sentences in the correct order. A variation of this activity is the **strip story**. Here, the teacher chooses a story that has the same number of sentences as there are students, and writes one sentence on each strip of paper. Each student is given a sentence, which must be memorized. Slips are collected by the teacher. Now, the students have to figure out, without writing anything down, the proper sequence of the sentences in the story and tell it to the teacher.

To conclude, I would like to say something about procedure. The normal procedure in teaching is to first teach students the language they will need to carry out a communicative activity, and to move from controlled to semicontrolled to free communication. Another approach is to do just the opposite: students are forced to communicate without any initial preparation. This means they may need to use language they have not yet been taught. This in

turn forces them to use important communication strategies: (1) searching memory for items learned or half-learned some time ago, (2) struggling to find circumlocutions when the appropriate term is not available, (3) perceiving when the listener has not understood what was said, and (4) rephrasing. In short, they must find alternate ways to get meaning across using whatever English they do know. Clearly, with this procedure students are going to make mistakes, but we know that taking risks and making mistakes are necessary parts of the learning process. And students also need to develop a type of confidence that is essential to learning a foreign language: the confidence to attempt to say something which they know they do not really know how to say.

While the students are communicating as best they can, the teacher moves around the room, listening, and determines what the students know and do not know, and this diagnosis provides the framework for future teaching. In this way, teaching is designed to meet actual needs of the students and time is not wasted on items already mastered.

The more students use English, the more fluent they will become. Activities in which students listen, speak, read, and/or write in ways similar to real communicative activity are necessary if students are to become fluent users of English.